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The 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, the Windrush scandal and the legacies of empire

Ruth Craggs

The recent Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London was substantially overshadowed by the Windrush scandal that blew up in the preceding week. This scandal, involving Home Office decisions over the immigration status of a generation of mainly Caribbean born migrants to the UK, caused outrage across the UK and the Commonwealth. Many who arrived as children before the tightening of immigration rules in 1971, and had lived in the UK for decades, were now struggling to access benefits and NHS care, were barred from returning after travelling abroad, and were threatened with deportation. Without evidence of when they arrived (which the government had failed to record or retain), many struggled to provide the documentation required to prove their right to live in the UK. Whilst the rights of Commonwealth citizens to settle in the UK have been gradually eroded since the 1960s, the crisis was caused by the Conservative Government's recent policy of creating a 'hostile environment' for immigrants in the UK illegally.

Many in UK government and Commonwealth circles may have been dismayed by the eruption of this crisis on the eve of the Commonwealth summit, but the partial resolution of the scandal can be seen as one tangible, and important, outcome of the CHOGM. A week before the conference, Caribbean high commissioners met and called on the government to change their approach; Barbados High Commissioner Guy Hewitt summarised their views: "I am dismayed that people who gave their all to Britain could be seemingly discarded so matter-of-factly." After initially refusing a request to discuss the scandal, UK Prime Minister Theresa May eventually met Caribbean leaders a couple of days before the summit, in a bid to prevent the affair engulfing the event entirely. Jamaican Prime Minister Andrew Holness addressed May directly: "Prime minister, we welcome your response and we look forward to a speedy implementation of your proposed solution." Whilst concerns about the migration status of individuals had been raised by Caribbean diplomats as early as 2016, the CHOGM brought Commonwealth leaders to London and provided the platform through which the UK government was forced to engage with it at the highest levels. Whilst the scandal is in no way resolved – it is reported that many people still face uncertainty over their futures and are still barred from accessing NHS services – the UK Government has been forced to apologise, a hotline has been set-up, and compensation has been offered.

The 2018 meeting is just the most recent of a whole series of Commonwealth summits where British government policy has come under the spotlight. Indeed, the events over the last few weeks demonstrate a key role that that Commonwealth has played successfully since the 1960s: holding the UK to account over various legacies of empire. The Commonwealth, and in particular the bi-annual Heads of Government Meetings, have regularly provided a forum through which to influence the UK government. CHOGMs provide proximity and access, as well as publicity through which to apply pressure. And Commonwealth

leaders, as well as the Commonwealth Secretary General, have consistently used these opportunities effectively.

At the 1971 summit, held in Singapore, African leaders led by Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania threatened to walk out of the meeting over the UK's sale of arms to South Africa. In press conferences and newspaper articles on the summit side-lines, as well as in the closed conference sessions, huge pressure was heaped on the UK's Ted Heath. Heath's experience at the CHOGM was described in the press as a 'ducking' and a cartoon in the British newspaper *The People* pictured him, armed with a cricket bat, furiously hitting back at balls slung at him by various African leaders. At the 1979 Lusaka CHOGM, a concerted campaign from many Commonwealth leaders, led by Kaunda and Nyerere as well as Commonwealth secretary General Sonny Ramphal, contributed to the UK government's decision to hold talks on the future of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. And at multiple meetings from the 1960s onwards, Commonwealth summits were used to apply pressure on the British government over its relationship with apartheid South Africa.

The latest CHOGM has demonstrated the continuing value of the Commonwealth for holding Britain to account. This role is not always an easy one for the Commonwealth to own. Such a vision for the organisation once again highlights the UK and the colonial past, something of an anachronism for an organisation trying to carve out a new role and identity. But to overlook its valuable role in these areas in a bid to shed out-dated views of the Commonwealth as a colonial hangover is to overlook some of the Commonwealth's key successes. Whilst many might be tempted to see the British empire as a thing of the past, the Windrush scandal demonstrates the on-going impacts of colonial policies, histories and ideologies in the present day. Whilst these legacies remain, the Commonwealth will continue to have this valuable role to play.